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ABSTRACT

Dominant sensory metaphors play a major role in speech, and this dominance further manifests itself in other behaviors involving particular sensory modes. Communicators use one of the five senses as dominant metaphor in their speech: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, oflactory, or gustatory. Interpersonal attending, which teaches the importance not only of listening (the auditory sense) but also of attending or taking note of the other four sensory modes, is a method students may use to discover their own and others' dominant sensory metaphors. By analyzing the presuppositions that a person's speech rests on, and by examining clusters of key words that keep recurring, students begin to attend more to the people in their lives. The core of this system is searching out a conversational partner's dominant system of metaphors and incorporating this knowledge into a coordinated system of talk. Students learn that sharing sensory metaphors to a great extent is sharing meaning. (CRH)

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SENSES AS METAPHOR:
A PROCEDURE FOR IDENTIFYING AND PRACTICING CONGRUENT COMMUNICATION

ABSTRACT

This essay identifies sensory metaphors in interpersonal communication. The thesis is advanced that communicators use one of five senses as the dominant metaphor in their talk: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory or gustatory. Interpersonal attending is introduced as a way communicators can form shared meanings by way of their knowledge and use of these metaphors. Guidelines for teaching sensory metaphors also are offered.

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SENSES AS METAPHOR:

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The key concerns for the interpersonal communicator are sharing personal or individual information and receiving or being aware of disclosures offered by another (Stewart, 1982). The interpersonal communication teacher addresses these concerns by structuring lessons around such central concepts as person perception, self-disclosure and listening. Thus, the basis of interpersonal communication is disclosing and receiving personal information (Miller and Steinberg, 1975). The goal of this essay is to enhance the traditional conceptual couplet: speaking-listening by focusing on (a) how sensory metaphors are shared in interpersonal encounters, and (b) how an understanding of these metaphors plays a role in interpersonal attending.

METAPHORS

In their book Metaphors We Live By, Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p.3) suggest that if "our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience and what we do everyday is very much a matter of metaphor." Since these authors assert that the "essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (1980, p. 5), metaphor analysis may unlock comparative experiencial meanings heretofore unreachable through other types of analysis. The powerful claim that we define our reality in terms of metaphor is illustrated by the authors' description of orientational and ontological metaphors.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 14) argue that orientational or spatial metaphors organize entire conceptual systems along such dimensions as up-down, in-out, front-back, and on-off, so that in English HAPPY IS UP as in "I'm feeling up today." The HAPPY IS UP, SAD IS DOWN metaphor is further illustrated in the statements: "That boosted my spirits," "My spirits rose," and "I fell into a depression" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 15). Moreover, there is a systematic relationship between various spatial metaphors creating a coherent metaphorical system. Thus, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980, pp. 15-19) point out, in our culture GOOD IS UP and BAD IS DOWN (e.g., "Things are looking up," "Our company hit a peak last year, but it's been downhill since then"), which is coherent with HEALTH AND LIFE ARE UP and SICKNESS AND DEATH ARE DOWN (e.g., "You look well and in the peak of health," "You're in top shape," "The President fell ill today; he came down with a cold").

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) also offer a concept of ontological metaphors which identify how we structure our experience in terms of the condition and use of physical objects and substances. Ontological metaphors are concrete and specific ways we structure our experience, making it intelligible to ourselves and to others. The achievement-oriented United States culture, for instance, seems to talk in ways which presuppose THE MIND IS AN ENTITY metaphor. Hence, we have THE MIND IS A MACHINE metaphor ("I can see those little wheels are turning up there," "Keep thinking, you'll grind out the answer soon," "Until I get my morning cup of coffee, I'm operating on three cylinders.").

This brief description of Lakoff and Johnson's work gives a glimpse of how we use metaphors in our everyday talk to structure and share our life experience. The most basic metaphors become highly ritualized so that communicators may use them without conscious awareness. Communicators in organizations and in personal relationships, for example, may generate consensual meanings around dominant metaphors.

Koch and Deetz (1981, pp.8-10), for example, tape recorded and analyzed conversations in organizations and identified such main metaphors as ORGANIZATION IS MACHINE (e.g., "Everything is going like clockwork," "He really threw a wrench into the works," and ORGANIZATION IS ORGANISM (e.g., "Low morale is a cancer which could kill us," "We need to keep growing, or we'll die."). In a study of the salient meanings laypersons held for their interpersonal relations, Owen (1982, p. 173) identified seven descriptive themes including RELATIONSHIPS AS WORK (e.g., "It's like your job, if you want to get paid every week, you gotta be there every week."). In the next section, we turn to a discussion of the role sensory metaphors play in maintaining consensual meanings in interpersonal relations.

SENSORY METAPHORS

The author has studied the talk people use to define and conceptualize their interpersonal relationships, and observes that virtually all persons illustrate and structure their experience through a dominant sensory modality. Individuals bind themselves together by conversing in ways that presuppose visual, auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory or gustatory sensation. A fact some psychotherapists (Grinder and Bandler, 1976) also have found. For example, a couple's primary sensory metaphor is visual in the following exchange.

> Male: Can't you see my point of view for once?! But no, you're so brilliant, you can't look at both sides--or at least my outlook!
>
> Female: Look it-don't cloud the issue! Sure we don't see eye- to-eye, but let me point out that it was you who had the bright idea to go to your mother's for the weekend!

An auditory sensory metaphor is illustrated through such descriptions as: "She went screaming down the hall," and "I guess I call that concept by a different name."). The kinesthetic metaphor presupposes an individual's experience surrounding touch (e.g., "I guess I didn't quite grasp that last lecture," and "That's a touchy subject to get a handle on."). Olfactory metaphors are linguistic constructions which stem from the sense of smell (e.g., "Sniff out more support for that argument," and "That idea is rosy, but the other one stinks!"). Finally, gustatory metaphors are identified by noting discourse focusing on the sense of taste (e.g., "Here's an idea you can sink your teeth into!," and "In that project, you bit off more than you could chew!"). Since the sense of taste is closely related to that of smell, sometimes it is difficult to differentiate the two (e.g., "He was really sweet."). Also, the aforementioned examples for all five metaphors exemplify an uncluttered view of sensory metaphors. A complete picture of a couple's metaphors indicates a more complex conceptualization. For one may ask: What if one person in a relationship uses a particular sensory metaphor while their partner uses another?

Research informs us that interpersonal relationships often are characterized by sharing a private code or personal idiom (Hopper, Knapp and Scott, 1976). Interactants report the successful maintenance or continuance of their partnerships as being due to the development of common values, interests, and activities (Hill, Rubin and Peplau, 1976), or to their uniqueness of interaction (Knapp, Ellis and Williams, 1980). One study indicates the perception of relational uniqueness appears to be a safeguard protecting a partnership from the ultimate "breakup" seen as the most prevalent outcome of all romantic relations (Owen, 1982). The ability of relational participants to converse with the same sensory metaphors will enhance or maintain the kind of commonality and relational uniqueness explained above. The author recorded the following conversation between a dating couple who had been

dating for about four months, which manifests unshared sensory metaphors.

> Female: Yeh, I see (visual) how you feel (kinesthetic); we're like the song: 'You Light Up My Life' (visual). But if you could show me (visual) sometimes that you care. I mean lighten up and show me (visual) you love me sometimes!
>
> Male: Well, I want to tell you (auditory) that, but I choke and tighten up (kinesthetic). Like when we first met and I drove up (kinesthetic) to your house, and sat (kinesthetic) in my car a long time before walking (kinesthetic) to your door.
>
> Female: I see (visual) what you mean. I knew there was something going on. I saw (visual) you out in your car and thought: 'Now what is it with this guy anyway?' I just wanted to point out (visual) how I'd like to get clear (visual) on our relationship. We've got to look to (visual) the future-you know.

While the male communicated primarily through a kinesthetic metaphor, the female shared her experience mostly through a visual one. There was a relative lack of consensual meaning or conversational coordination. The coordination of conversation can be viewed as a problem needing a solution. In any conversation, two interactants implicitly bring their individual solutions to the problems of mutual understanding and shared meaning. As Lewis (1969) observes, the key to solving coordination problems is to select a common "convention." Shared conversational metaphors play a role in sustaining interactive conventions.

Relational coordination (i.e., sharing similar values, interests and activities) can

be identified as parallel to or at least manifested by conversational coordination. Thus, in the conversation above the couple's uncoordination displayed through disparate metaphor use may reveal to analyst and participants alike a troubled relationship. Interpersonal relationship coordination can be enhanced through attention given to the use of sensory metaphors in conversation. Sensory metaphors can be taught in communication courses as a form of interpersonal attending.

TEACHING INTERPERSONAL ATTENDING

Interpersonal attending is the set of behaviors communicators learn in interpersonal communication courses to achieve shared meanings or conversational coordination. Norton and Pettegrew (1979, p. 16) identify the related concept "attentiveness" as a communication style which "involves focused regard reflecting alertness and/or awareness." One argument of this essay is that this focused regard or alertness can be enhanced by identifying interactant's sensory metaphors.

It is not enough to teach students about disclosing and listening because, as we have established above, people communicate through a dominant sensory mode. To teach only listening (i.e., the auditory sense), then, is to ignore the other four kinds of sensory experience. Even though communication education focuses primarily on speaking and listening, we must begin giving the concept attentiveness some pedagogical focus.

A first step in teaching interpersonal attending is to have students discover their own and other's dominant sensory metaphors. One method the author has devised accomplishes this goal. Students keep sensory logs in which they (a) transcribe several separate audiotaped conversations with at least two persons, and (b) interpret the one or two sensory metaphors displayed in this speech. Often students find it difficult, however, discerning the metaphors in talk, especially when

choosing the speech of a close relative or personal friend. It seems that the better we know each other, the more difficult it is to analyze sensory metaphors. Thus, students are encouraged to keep these questions in mind while examining their transcripts.

1. What is presupposed by this person's speech? (e.g., Does his/her speech rely heavily on verbal pictures, pungent odors or tastes, or on the physical manipulation of persons or objects?)

2. Are there clusters of key words which recur throughout this person's speech? (Usually sensory metaphors appear as themes which thread throughout one's speech. Look especially at verbs, adjectives and adverbs occurring in tightly-knit groups. For example, in the statement: "I feel warm about the way you keep running briskly back to me after our knock-down-drag-out fights," "feel" and "running" are kinesthetic verbs, "warm" and "briskly" are kinesthetic adverbs, and "knock-down-drag-out" is a kinesthetic adjective.).

When students are able to discover the dominant sensory metaphors exhibited in their own and other's speech, they begin to attend more to the people in their lives. A second step in attending involves students in verbalizing their new-found awareness. The author uses a modification of Miller, Nunnally and Wackman's (1975,pp. 58-61) "documenting interpretations" to facilitate this verbal behavior. Documenting interpretations is the verbal process of linking what we conclude, think

or interpret with a description of what we sense. For example, one may say: "I see you staring into space and not answering me. I think your mind must be somewhere else." (Miller et al., 1975, p. 58). The first utterance is a sense statement, while the second is an interpretation. Documenting interpretations requires students to make sensory observations overt in the form of sense statements, which prepares them for increased oral facility with sensory metaphors.

The heart of interpersonal attending is searching out a conversational partner's dominant sensory metaphor and incorporating this knowledge into a coordinated system of talk. Students learn that sharing sensory metaphors to a great extent is sharing meaning. Hence, beyond learning to make sense statements and to link them with interpretations, students learn to match and ultimately create meanings by generating messages in the relational sensory metaphor system. There are two ways the author recommends to aid students in generating this system.

First, students learn to identify and then match the sensory metaphor used by their partner. To illustrate this point, let us explore the conversation between the dating couple given earlier.

> Female: Yeh, I'm beginning to grasp how you feel (kinesthetic); We're like the book: Body Language! (kinesthetic). But if you could reach out (kinesthetic) and show me (visual) sometimes that you care. I mean loosen up and go the distance (kinesthetic) to show me (visual) you love me sometimes!
>
> Male: Well, I want to show you (visual) that, but I choke and tighten up (kinesthetic). Like when we first met and I drove up (kinesthetic) to your house and sat in my car for a long

time before walking (kinesthetic) to your door. I just can't quite get a grip (kinesthetic) on my emotions. I can't get in touch (kinesthetic) with 'em. I feel (kinesthetic) funny about it and can't quite help it-you know?

Female: I can handle (kinesthetic) that. I knew there was something goin' on. You know—I held my breath while you sat (kinesthetic) there in your car, and thought: Now what is this guy unsettled (kinesthetic) about anyway?

The synchronization of the kinesthetic sensory metaphor above helped create a coordinated conversation. Students come to realize that by beginning to match sensory metaphors there will be a resultant smoother interaction, a characteristic identified in well established, successful relationships (Knapp et al., 1980).

A second method in achieving a coordinated relationship is by attending through the actual dominant sense expressed by the other. For example, the coordinated use of the kinesthetic metaphor in the conversation above can be enhanced through actions. Increased touching, gesturing or even going for a walk, or a car ride may assist the interactants' verbal channel in their striving for mutual understanding. So too may gustatory and olfactory spoken metaphors be accompanied by eating and preparing meals while conversing. The author knows several couples who solve their interpersonal disputes over coffee, drinks or dinner. And, spoken visual and auditory metaphors can be enhanced through viewing movies, television and listening to recorded music. For instance, a man who had been jilted by a lover thirteen years earlier once remarked how it "still is hard to listen to 'our song'."

The point is that since dominant sensory metaphors play a major role in our

speech, then we can expect this dominance to further be manifested in other behaviors involving particular sensory modes. Researchers need to investigate further whether there are such concepts as "kinesthetic people" or "visual people." Should future work indicate this is so, the ramifications for communication education are staggering. For example, suppose some speech teachers are primarily kinesthetic. They may unconsciously grasp mostly gestures and touch-related speech while evaluating public speeches. Or, imagine some teachers are visually oriented. They may search for verbal pictures in student speeches. Moreover, we have not begun addressing the role dominant sensory metaphors may play in teaching styles. Perhaps we all could become more flexible in coordinating our sensory speech with a disparate student body.

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